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ABSTRACT

A self-assessment of commuter student programs and services at San Diego State University (SDSU) indicated that the university was doing well in meeting the needs of this population. For many years, most of the students at SDSU have been commuter students. Services and programs that were developed were created with the commuter student in mind. Many of these services were well ahead of their time. Specific findings and recommendations from the evaluation include: (1) because commuter student needs are being adequately addressed within the existing system, there is no need for a separate commuter student program; (2) the Student Resource and Information Center should act as the coordinating unit for improving and implementing services; and (3) the Student Resource and Information Center should continue to act as the Statewide Clearinghouse for Commuter Student Information. (DC)

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On the need for separate commuter programs:

San Diego State looks at its students

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By Barbie McCully

Recently, a new population of students was identified as needing some attention: Commuter Students, "the neglected majority". A nationwide programming movement began to pick up steam and last year a commission under the guidance of ACPA was formed to coordinate information-sharing about commuter student programs. I was requested to head up the efforts on our campus and to establish a clearinghouse for commuter student programs for the State of California.

It was not difficult to identify some amount of programs and services that could be developed to assist commuter students: carpool programs, message boards, on-campus phones, off-campus housing, lockers, to name a few. Unlike programming for the other non-traditional student groups, however, the range of programs and services that could be developed under the guise of "commuter students" seem limited. It was disheartening to learn of other campuses that were expending a great deal of time and money on commuter student programs when a commuter student commitee couldn't think of many.

A review of materials from other institutions shed some light on this baffllement. Many campuses, apparently still under the influence of the in loco parentis model, were trying to break down a truly attitudinal problem. Coming from a campus, and a system, that has been for a number of years commuter oriented, it hadn't dawned on me that bias existed against commuting students. A description of this problem is afforded by SUNY — Stony Brook in its Commuter Student Handbook.:

"Stony Brook University is amazingly ignorant of what exactly a commuter is (you know, what does a commuter look like? What language do they speak? What do you feed a commuter?) The result of this ignorance is a number of generalizations and stereotypes with reference to commuters that you may run into during your stay at Stony Brook.

"First of all, there's always that implication that the one reason that commuters do commute is that they don't want to leave their parents. This leads to certain ideas about commuters, such as that they are more conservative, slightly immature, have no social life whatsoever, and are considered in some circles to be "nerds". They have shorter hair which is usually slicked down with Brylcream (you remember Brylcream), they wear pennyloafers with dimes in them, and they usually have Bowmar Brains attached to their belts. In general, these stereotypical people are not the kind of people you'd let your sister or brother talk to, let alone marry.

"All this stereotyping is symptomatic of a situation occuring at Stony Brook. There is in fact a sequestering of the two major groups of students that exist here — resident and commuter. The major reason this sequestering exists is because the two groups are institutionally separated. Resident students have their dorms, and commuters have their homes, cars, P-lot, and the Commuter Center. There is not much interaction between members of the two major groups outside of a classroom situation."

In the introduction to a study of resident and non-resident students at Auburn University, the problem arises: Who are commuter students?

"Welty, however, defined commuter students as being students who live with their parents during the school years. Ward and Kurtz (p.2) propose a broader definition of the term. Commuter students are students who live at home with their parents or other close relatives, but the term should also include students living in off-campus housing who are not under the direct supervision of the college or university."

Although the Auburn study includes all commuting students (not just those living at their parents' home), the research cited is based, apparently, on those students who do live with their parents:

"Certain characteristics are, however, typical of commuter students, and they must be taken into consideration for program formulation at colleges and universities with large commuter populations. Graff and Cooley (1976) found that commuters tended to be less satisfied with their academic programs than resident students. Stark (1965) concluded that commuters evidenced lower social skills and lower participation in campus activities than resident students. They were unlikely to form close friendships with new classmates or to establish a feeling of identity with their college, and they usually continued to associate with high school peers and remained more closely attached to home than to college. The lack of separation in the progression from high school to college-while-at-home often deprives commuter students of an acceptable landmark from which to measure personal development (Schuchman, 1966). Because the transition from family to college is generally an incomplete one, they are often slower to change ineffective study habits developed in high school and to achieve self-direction in transcending family relationships."

These are not unusual references. Many publications include such statements. Not meaning to discount the realities of such

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biases on other campuses, it is not believeable that San Diego State has the same programmatic biases except for, possibly, the area of Residential Life. Due to its long history as a commuter-oriented institution, San Diego State University treated all students as students; most administrators and students contacted felt that if any bias existed at all it would fall in favor of commuter students due to the fact that the overwhelming percentage of students do commute to campus.

It is difficult to envision "certain characteristics. . .typical of commuter students," and San Diego State is not alone in these thoughts. Six out of the 19 CSUC campuses do not have residence halls. With the exception of a very few campuses, the CSUC campuses program for the commuter students. It is significant to remember that many campuses are still struggling to obtain funding for programs now considered to be essential such as child care centers, (The San Diego State Child Care Center started in 1970) and similar programs.

Many campuses profess that the most direct result of their attitudinal bias against commuter students is the lack of programming directed toward commuter students and their particular needs. The National Clearinghouse on Commuter Student Programs published an index of examples of commuter student services and programs: On-campus overnight facilities; lounges in classroom buildings; shower facilities; locker services; information center; day care center; free parking privileges for students; on-campus bus service; auto repair; separate orientation sessions; special meal plans; commuter newsletter; landlord-tenant legal information; outpost centers in densely populated areas; and, carpools. Upon review of existing programs and services, it is believed that San Diego State is quite in line with the National Clearinghouse's list of what should be offered.

This is not to say that programs and services cannot be improved on the San Diego State campus. Void of recognizing a real need for a separate commuter student program, one positive outcome of this nationwide attention on commuter students has been to force San Diego State to take another hard look at existing programs and services. Following are a few recommendations on how San Diego State could handle the concept of a commuter student program and how offerings to students can be improved:

I. There is no need for a separate commuter student program.

Approximately 93 percent of San Diego State students commute to campus. Although the percentages of students living on campus may have changed throughout the years, little increase in the actual number of students living in university-sanctioned housing has occurred since 1968. What is more, a very small percentage of students choose to live on campus for any length of time, with the possible exception of some students in sororities and fraternities.

According to the SDSU POll, Fall 1979, almost 16 percent of SDSU students live with their parents and 29 percent had graduated from a high school in San Diego County. It is likely that many of the former group also fall into the latter; thus, they fit the traditional stereotypes of a commuter student — they stay in the same geographic area as their high school and live with their parents. However, these figures indicate that the vast majority of the students choose to be commuter students.

Perhaps a conclusion has been reached that campuses which feel the need for broad commuter programs must either have students (1) who feel "denied" relative to programs and sources due to the fact that they are commuter students or (2) who have been neglected relative to programs and services due to a slant toward residential students on the part of student personnel staff. Apparently San Diego State students do not feel denied anything just because they're commuters, inasmuch as they choose to not live on campus. Due to the long history of predominantly working with commuter students, it is not believed that Student Affairs Staff neglect commuter students.

A list follows of some programs and services that are provided already for San Diego State students. It should be noted that a good many of these services and programs are sponsored by the Associated Students. In fact, the commuter student "movement" at San Diego State really grew from the impressive resource of the Associated Students and the guidance and foresight of its own management and elected officials. Aztec Center was the first student union in the CSUC system, and the A.S. Child Care Center, Legal Services, Crafts Center, HELP Center, Women's Center, and Carpool Program were all established ahead of their time, so to speak.

- Student Union (listening rooms, lounges, study areas, etc.)
- Bowling Alley
- Information Booth
- Post Office
- Ticket Agency
- Lost and Found
- Travel Agency
- Backdoor (concert club)
- General Store (health food, organic produce)
- Outdoor Recreation Services
- Aquatic Center
- Crafts Center
- Intramural Program (including handball-raquetball complex)
- Off-Campus Housing Advisor
- Tenant-Landlord Information
- Legal Services
- Food Services (a variety of meal plans)
- Rideshare Program (carpool, vanpool)
- Bike Lanes around Campus
- Bike Lockers
- Distressed Motorist Services
- Escort Service
- Child Care Center
- Single-Parent Groups
- Ombudsman
- Undergraduate Advising Centers
- Grassroots Councils (decentralized portion of Student Government)
- Women's Center
- HELP Center
- On-Campus Phones
- Commuter Week
- Health Services

II. For those programs and services we can identify to improve or implement, the Student Resource and Information Center could act as a coordinating unit.

Just because we have been able to keep ahead of the game relative to commuter student programming, we, shouldn't assume we have done everything we can. A commuter student committee has been formed and has met twice to assist in the organization of Commuter Week. During those meetings a number of suggestions were formulated to deal with commuter students' needs, based upon our personal experiences. Data gathered through the

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Traditional commuter school lists its programs

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SDSU Poll were also used as indicators of commuter students' needs and concerns. The following are some statistics gathered throughout the SDSU Poll that the committee used which may be of some significance in divising programs and services for commuter students:

1. 45 percent of our students live farther than ten miles from campus; 36 percent live two miles to ten miles from campus.

2. 6.3 percent of respondents listed parking as the characteristic that would most likely lead them to leave our institution. (That was the highest mark given).

3. 67.2 percent bought a parking sticker and 75.8 percent come to campus in a car.

4. 18.9 percent either ride or share a ride to campus. 41.2 percent said they would not be interested in carpooling; 29.8 percent would not participate due to odd hours.

5. The two most important services of information were the **Daily Aztec** and word-of-mouth.

6. 32 percent are interested in taking Saturday classes.

7. 75 percent are employed.

8. Health Services, Orientation, Financial Aid, and the Advising Center seem to be the activities in which most students are involved.

In the future, we hope to gather information about potential commuter student programs. Questions in the Poll could range from asking about a four-day academic week to asking whether students would pay for a housing rental service.

In coordinating and offering services, publicity is always a critical issue. High traffic areas should be identified and utilized when possible. Bulletin boards, revolving display racks, and video displays should be more fully utilized to get the word out to commuter students. Long lines at registration and elsewhere are usually predictable, and as such could be used to ease the tension such waiting causes and answer general questions at the same time.

III. Student Resource and Information Center should continue to act as the Statewide Clearinghouse for Commuter Student Information

Although we haven't much to show for our efforts, I think we're doing as good a job as could be expected. I'm pleased with the response we've gotten through follow-up letters and my next letter will include a list of all respondents so that they may communicate with each other. Also, it will be requested that each of them send something to the National Clearinghouse for its files.

Some suggestions that could be implemented next year follow:

A. Instead of holding our own commuter student conference, we should write a letter to all relevant associations-organizations requesting them to include a commuter student workshop at their conferences. If the Housing Association is having a conference, it should include a workshop on commuter students, as for any other group. It might then become a part of our role to serve as advocates or commuters calling these others to the task.

B. Somehow produce or be involved with a quality programming newsletter. Because of tight budgets, the best alternative might be to contribute to ACPA's **Commuter Programs** newsletter as well as **The Commuter**, at the same time helping to promote ACPA Commission XVII and the National Clearinghouse.

For San Diego State, and perhaps for many other predominantly commuter institutions, the broader issue is the necessity for targeting commuters as a specific population. If a built-in, long-standing bias exists at an institution, such an approach seems profitable. If, however, as is the case with many California system schools, the student body has traditionally been a commuter group, then the services which exist do so for the commuters.

San Diego State will continue to examine existing programs and services in an effort to improve them, and it is hoped that new services will be developed in response to demonstrated needs for both commuters and non-commuters.

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